2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

mile of shallow water. There was a haze over the land, a sure sign of hot weather ahead, and the straggling town of Ras-al-Khaimah had the blurred appearance of a Whistler pastel. The palace, cornered by battlemented towers with an architectural resemblance to a crusader's castle, was built of pink rock, the rose-red hue of Petra. In the sunlight it had the beauty of a coral shell, hemmed in by the cube-shaped houses of the merchants, walled gardens of date palms and pomegranates, and the gleaming gold dome of the mosque.

We disembarked alongside a little wooden pier and began to trail up the steep, pebbled shore towards the palace. A guard of Beni Yas tribesmen approached with rifles at the ready, until the Khan Sahib gave them a sign and spoke to them in the local dialect. Recognizing him, they bowed respectfully and, after scrutinizing us with a great show of curiosity, ushered us through the tall gateway into the palace courtyard. It was open to the sun, with two tall palm trees growing as high as the verandas, on which lolled Arab retainers in the act of performing their morning toilet. Camels, tied to stakes in the ground, reared up on their knees as we entered and began to snarl in their unpleasant fashion.

Standing in an ornately-decorated doorway was a tall, white-bearded figure, clad in long white robes, with a gold sword belted to his waist. It was Sheikh Sultan bin Salim, ruler of Ras-al-Khaimah. He slowly descended the steps to the courtyard and embraced the Khan Sahib in the Arab style, and then shook hands with each of us in turn. In a few minutes we were joined by the members of the Court, and the procession wended its way into the cool, dim reception chamber at the far end of the palace. The building was in a much better state of repair than the palace at Sharjah, and the floor of the chamber was of black and white marble squares, highly polished by sandals. The chairs, of rosewood inlaid with mother o' pearl, were emblazoned with the sheikh's coat of arms, whilst priceless Shiraz rugs, of wine red and Prussian blue pattern, were scattered on the floor.

Silk cushions were provided for us to sit upon, and after the usual introductory conversation, a slave brought in a pot of fragrant coffee. A large brass tray was placed by our side; this contained numerous sweetmeats, including Turkish delight, and little bowls of pomegranates, oranges and almonds. The sheikh questioned us about our journey, and seemed highly amused when we told him of the breakdown of the cars. He soon started off on a long discourse about the advantages of having an airfield at Ras-al-Khaimah,

most of whom belonged to the Quasimi clan, of which the Sheikh of Sharjah is the titular head. I have had many a joke with Sheikh Sultan and his nobles over stories of the old piratical days, and they were greatly amused to learn that my great-great-grandfather, who entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman in 1789, had taken part in a sortie against Sharjah in 1830, when his frigate shelled the town as a reprisal against a murderous attack on a British merchantman. I shall refer later to the history of piracy in Oman which, on account of the predatory raids on shipping, gained the title of 'the Pirate Coast' in the last century.

The town of Sharjah is built on the shores of the creek, the contour of which it follows in crescent shape until the open sea is reached; at low tide a spit of sand or 'bar', separates the creek from the Gulf. Only at low tide is it possible to cross the creek on foot and make the journey to Khan; on the far side of this sand-bridge or 'bar' there is a primitive wooden lighthouse, built by the sheikh for the guidance of the pearling boats, and a small colony of fishermen's huts. The residences of the merchants, which are all two-storeyed buildings with wide verandas and imposing gateways, are built facing the sea, a distinct advantage in the hot weather. When a breeze is blowing, they are cooler inside in the summer months than an air-conditioned room at the Fort, and much more pleasant.

The town is about half a mile in length, and an eighth of a mile wide, with narrow, crooked streets running through the centre, and quaint, dark alleyways formed by the back walls of the houses. I could never get accustomed to the twists and curves of these streets, some of which were wide enough for only two people to pass abreast, although the Arabs used to ride donkeys and camels through them. Little doorways would suddenly open in the walls, whilst from a window high up would descend a cascade of refuse or dirty water. Some of these doorways are extremely beautiful; shaped like the double doors of an old English church, they are set in a frame of decorated stone, and the unvarnished teak is studded with pointed brass knobs. Sometimes they are inset with a secondary door, large enough to admit one person.

One afternoon I accompanied the Station Engineer, Sparkes, to Sharjah on a shopping expedition; we took a mechanic, Mahmud, with us to act as interpreter. Sparkes wanted to haggle with one of the merchants, and rather impolitely declined to rely on my Arabic. He had recently purchased an old Arab seal, a large, oval

30: Gt. Britain G-5 (ca. 1918) 1920 MJ1 Saudi Arabia
Trucial Oman MK4

361 438 162 the landward side, the defences are ruinous. There is good water in wells from 5 to 30 ft. deep. The town has three main quarters: (1) *Deirah*, on a tongue of land on the NE. side of the creek, between it and the sea, with a date-grove at the back, contains the main bazaar of 350 shops and about 1,600 houses, inhabited by Arabs, Persians, Baluchis, and others; (2) *Shandaghah*, on the SW. side of the creek, contains a residence of the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi, with about 250 houses all occupied by Arabs, domicile being forbidden to others; (3) *Dibai* proper, on the same side but farther from the sea, with about 200 houses, 50 shops, and the principal mosque, is the quarter in which British-Indian subjects are collected.

The chief elements of the population are: Beni Yās (440 houses), Āl Bu Maheir (400 houses), mixed Arabs, including natives of Hasa, Bahrein, and Koweit (400 houses), Persians (250 houses), Sūdān (250 houses), and Baluchis (200 houses). The people own about 4,000 date-trees; other cultivation is confined to a little lucerne; live stock includes nearly 2,000 camels, 400 donkeys, 400 head of cattle, and about 1,000 goats. There are about 335 pearl-boats, and 20 sea-going vessels.

• 504 The importance of Dibai lies in its increasing use as a port of call for steamers, which lie outside the creek; the place has largely supplanted Lingeh in Persia as the chief distributing centre of foreign goods to the interior, especially to the Bireimi oasis. Before the war, steamers of the British India and Bombay and Persia Steam Navigation Companies called at the port, the first at regular fortnightly intervals.

III. Shārjah

635 This is the most important of the principalities, having coasts on both gulfs, and covering a considerable portion of the Oman promontory. With the exception of the Sheikhdoms of 'Ajmān and Umm el-Qaiwein on the W. coast, and a part of the interior which is to all intents and purposes independent, it practically includes everything between a line from Sha'am to Dibah on the N., and Shārjah town and Khōr Kalba on the S. The principality is nominally all under the Sheikh Khālid ibn Ahmed, who succeeded Sajar ibn Khālid in 1914. But, as in Bahrein, his resources are curtailed by the cession of important territory as fiefs or appanages. The Sheikh rules Shārjah town and district, and the Oasis of Dheid is administered by a Vali in his name. But Ras el-Kheimah, under the late reign, had almost attained a recognized independence; and the important Shameilīyah district on the Gulf of Oman, nominally a fief held by a member of the ruling family residing in 'Ajmān, has

TO 133 502 721

in two miles from their entrances. Thus it was that the pirate tribes were able to build their towns behind these natural booms, and to carry on their ruthless calling in defiance of the British and Portuguese navies — and to earn for their stronghold the much feared and romantic name, "The Pirate Coast".

TO 101 631 648 628 [527]

Trucial Oman, as it is called today, is ruled by six independent sheikhs, bound under old treaties with Britain to maintain a maritime truce for the prevention of piracy and slave-trading. Family feuds and inter-tribal quarrelling are as common among them as are the rusty, ancient cannon. Many of the latter are no doubt from British men-o'-war, and some are still used for ceremonial occasions, a party afterwards being despatched to retrieve the cannon-balls.

TO 361 504 439

Unspoiled by time, Sharjah is one of the principal little towns, but it lacks the enchantment of Dibai, a picturesque centre a few miles along the coast to the west. A wide, shallow inlet divides Dibai and its waterfront of quaint little coffee-houses, and provides anchorage for dhows that bring transshipped goods from other continents. In the large market-place, spread on either side of the inlet and connected by a ferry-service of numerous little pole-propelled craft, the bedouin, with his henna-dyed beard and ancient rifle, can be seen fingering everything that is on show, from modern radio sets to ladies' lingerie, but he has little use for some of the strange products of the West.

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